

## Soft Power by Accident or by Design: *If You Are the One* and Chinese Television

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The notion of soft power started to gain traction with the Chinese policy makers as early as the 1990s, but it was not until 2008 – when China realized that there was a big discrepancy between how China saw itself and how the world saw China (J. Wang) – that the concept started to bear policy implications. In 2008, China succeeded in hosting the Beijing Olympics but failed to convince the Western world of its rightful territorial claim to Tibet and its handling of the human rights issues related to it. To China's policy-makers and strategic thinkers, how China can gain the ability to “get what it wants through appeal and attraction” – Joseph Nye's definition of soft power (*Bound to Lead*) – was no longer just a theoretical question. Unlike the United States, which witnessed only a lukewarm response to Nye's soft power arguments, the concept of soft power became widely embraced in China's foreign policy discourse and in strategic frameworks that were articulated in the major speeches by the Chinese leadership (Hayden).

It was also widely believed in China's policy-making circle that the concept and theory of soft power needed to be converted – quickly – into the tangible outcome of creating a more desirable international opinion environment for its policies and actions. As public and cultural diplomacy programs and international broadcasting efforts are the key instruments of soft power, it is not surprising that China's public diplomacy policies, practices and initiatives (such as the Confucius Institute) moved into “higher gear” (d'Hooghe) around the Beijing Olympics. Also, China's state media organizations were explicitly charged with the task of generating soft power for China. The turbo-charged “going out” or “going global” project, undertaken by China's external propaganda department, received a key strategic investment that was primarily intended to “gradually change China's image in international society from negative to neutral to positive” (Y. Wang 269).

China's policymakers also have taken to heart Joseph Nye's (“Rise”) argument that soft power is more about whose story wins than about whose army wins. For this reason, China's state media has been tasked with creating the nation's own “China story”. This mandate was explicitly articulated in 2013 by China's President Xi Jinping, who urged China's state media to “tell the Chinese story effectively and relay China's voice faithfully” (Cai).

In short, China's pursuit of soft power features a top-down approach and deploys massive state and government resources (Cho and Jeong). It is soft power by design, and as such, is both ambitious in scale and calculated in execution. However, so far, these large-scale, top-down, expensive media going-out initiatives have borne little fruit in the way of cutting a more favorable international image of China. Harsh as it may sound, this seems to be the assessment of both Chinese and international commentators (Miao et al.; Shambaugh). In contrast, *If You Are the One* (henceforth IYATO), a dating show from a provincial Chinese television station, which at one stage was almost shut down by the Chinese authorities, has caught the imagination of global viewers – both non-Chinese and diasporic Chinese alike – and is now widely touted as a rare window through which the world can get to know the real China. Could “soft power by accident” trump soft power by design? If so, what – if anything – can China do to maximize its chances of generating soft power by accident? More specifically, what are the key ingredients that have led to IYATO's accidental success as a soft power icon?

This chapter pursues these questions through the prism of the small screen – television. First, it outlines some of the challenges facing Chinese television, paying particular attention to three television genres that are charged with a soft power mandate: news, documentary and television drama. Against the backdrop of the opportunities and difficulties, the chapter tracks the show's

initial popularity and subsequent trouble with the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT; now known as the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television – SAPPRFT). Finally, it outlines IYATO’s wildly successful foray into the transnational and global media imaginary. The discussion demonstrates that, in more ways than one, IYATO, now China’s best-known dating show, is an example of how soft power can be generated where it is least expected. Indeed, the discussion points towards new pathways for achieving cultural influence that are superior to China’s current soft power initiatives – initiatives which are largely government-operated and freely provided and which aim to promote an exclusively positive image of China. The main objective of this discussion is not to present information regarding the ratings, the size of viewership, and actual impact of the show on foreign publics – although these will be addressed somewhat indirectly and implicitly. Rather, it is to examine the political economy and cultural politics behind the production and circulation of IYATO and, in doing so, to provide the context in which IYATO presents itself as a prism through which we can better understand China’s soft power prospects.

### **The “going out” policy and Chinese television**

In the last decade or so, especially since the Beijing Olympics in 2008, the Chinese government and its policy think-tanks have become increasingly convinced that although China’s global influence in the domains of politics, economics and international relations has grown exponentially, the international community’s understanding and knowledge of China is limited, biased and inaccurate (Y. Wang; Hu and Ji). Therefore, projecting an image of China that is objective, truthful and three-dimensional is seen as not only necessary but also “urgent” (Yang). Organizations tasked with this objective include the People’s Daily, China Daily, China Central Television (CCTV), China Radio International (CRI), Xinhua News Agency, China News, and the Foreign Language Press. As an essential part of China’s going out strategy, these key organizations are heavily subsidized, to the tune of an annual budget for “external propaganda” of \$6 billion, to facilitate the dramatic expansion of the nation’s media presence overseas – the goal being to establish a global Chinese media empire to break what China considers “the Western media monopoly” (Shambaugh).

In the television sector, China has identified three television genres and formats as key areas for expansion: news, documentary and television drama. Dubbed as the “three horse-driven carriages” charged with the task of propelling the media going-global initiative, these genres are expected to carry Chinese content to far-flung countries and to as many viewers as possible. But, visionary as this plan may sound, it has proven to be a case of “easier said than done”. This was made clear in a panel discussion featuring three prominent speakers: Miao Di, Director of the Film Institute of China Communication University, Liu Wen, Executive Director of CCTV’s documentary channel, and Hu Zhifeng, Director of the Arts and Humanities Research Institute of China Communication University. Each of these commentators expressed the view that television dramas that have been produced in China, and have done reasonably well there, have had little resonance with audiences globally. Where Chinese television drama has had some success – albeit limited – is in the countries of East and Southeast Asia, where a Confucianist culture still prevails (Miao et al.).

One notable exception to this was the enthusiastic reception of *Daughter-in-Law’s Beautiful Era* (*Xifu de meihao shidai*) on Tanzanian state television in 2011. Initially screened on Shanghai TV in 2009, this thirty-six-episode drama series, retitled *Doudou Na Mama Wakwe Zake* in Swahili for Tanzanian audiences, was praised as a valuable opportunity for Tanzanian viewers to get a sense of “what real life was like in China” (Huang). A China Radio International journalist’s account of the success of *Daughter-in-Law’s Beautiful Era* (Chen) details the extensive and careful deliberation between China’s cultural attaché in Tanzania, the producer of the show, and key figures from China Radio International (which provided the dubbing). A number of candidate television drama series were shortlisted, including *Yearnings*, a popular series in the 1990s, and a few series in the kung fu genre. Finally, *Daughter-in-Law* was chosen for its “upbeat, optimistic views of ordinary Chinese

people” delivered in a “funny and light-hearted manner”.

One of the few minor success stories involving a Chinese television drama making its way to the global market of the West is *Empresses in the Palace*, also known as *The Legend of Zhenhuan* (Zhenhuan Zhuan). This gripping series, based on the Internet novel of the same name and focusing on the lives and everyday politics – often a matter of life and death – of several mistresses and concubines who lived with the emperor in China in 1722, proved to be enormously popular when screened in China in 2011. It is also one of the few Chinese television dramas that have made the playlist of the on-demand Internet streaming site Netflix, providing a rare opportunity for Netflix audiences to watch a mainland television drama from China. The listing of the series on Netflix in 2015 was the result of cutting down the original seventy-six forty-five-minute episodes into six ninety-minute episodes. Although the ratings were not high (3.6 out of 5 as of November 2015), the fact that it did make the Netflix list – very few Chinese television drama series do – ensures that mainstream US viewers can now watch a television drama from China and learn something about Chinese history and culture (“Legend”).

As for the prospect of Chinese television documentaries going global, the challenges are no less daunting. After all, Chinese documentaries on state television can seldom touch on sensitive social issues such as aging, child labor, or environmental problems, yet as a genre, the documentary is precisely where these issues are expected to be exposed and explored. This restriction is evidenced by the fact that former CCTV journalist Chai Jing’s documentary, *Under the Dome*, an investigation into the causes of pollution in China, made its debut appearance in the Tencent and Youku Tudou video portals. The film “went viral” in late February 2015 and was viewed more than 300 million times, but after initially attracting positive attention from the *People’s Daily* and receiving praise from the Chinese Minister for Environmental Protection, it was subsequently blocked in March, a week after its release.

In general, state television turns its resources to producing programs that are politically safe yet still able to resonate with viewers across cultural and ideological divides. *A Bite of China* (*Shejian shangde Zhongguo*), a documentary series produced by CCTV about the history and culture of food, eating and cooking, is one such show. Initially aired on Chinese television in 2013 and achieving extremely high ratings, the series, with an investment of ten million *yuan*, generated 300 million *yuan* in revenue. More importantly, as a show with the capacity to speak to global audiences, *A Bite of China* quickly generated many copyright sales in international film exhibitions. With international sales reaching \$350,000, the series has set a record for Chinese documentaries released overseas (Niu and Li) and is available on YouTube. However, it has to be said that *A Bite of China* is the exception to the rule, as far as the international appeal of the Chinese television documentary is concerned.

In the domain of news and current affairs, the prospects are even dimmer. Despite the phenomenal amount of money and resources invested in the media-going-global initiatives, a dominant view, shared by scholars both inside and outside China, is that there is little evidence of a good return on this investment (Shambaugh). Echoing this view but in a much less acerbic tone, two Chinese media and communication scholars observe:

Even though Chinese television has improved its capacity to transmit externally, we still have too many problems. In terms of content, we tend to produce programs that only make sense to ourselves, while ignoring the expectations of foreign viewers. In terms of capacity building, we only focus on expanding television platforms, while ignoring the need to improve the appeal of content. We normally privilege news and current affairs over entertainment, but due to ideological differences, Westerners are hard-wired to distrust our news. As a result, misunderstandings and miscommunication abound. (Li and Cheng)

This is not to say that there have been no successful experiments in news coverage or entertainment on Chinese television. CCTV's coverage of the Sichuan earthquake in 2008 is a good case in point. When a massive earthquake hit the county of Wenchuan and its neighboring towns in China's Sichuan Province on 12 May 2008, killing more than 70,000 people and leaving millions homeless, CCTV launched an immediate and sustained media campaign, covering the disaster round the clock for two weeks on end. Viewers were given updates of the latest developments and on-location interviews with rescue coordinators and experts, as well as CNN-style banners running across the bottom of the television screen with the latest casualty figures. The most innovative moment on CCTV took place two days after the earthquake, when the network tried something that was new not only in the history of media in the People's Republic of China but also in the world. Western audiences, long used to images and narratives of China's poor human rights record and lack of press freedom, seemed genuinely impressed by the level of transparency and the state media's display of compassion for ordinary Chinese people (Sun and Zhao). However, CCTV's performance on this occasion proved an exception to the rule, and the Sichuan earthquake turned out to be an isolated event that failed to precipitate a paradigm shift in news-making practices in China.

### ***If You Are the One: Why is it popular?***

In the minds of policy makers and soft power think-tank scholars, it may well be inconceivable that a reality television dating show should be tasked with the lofty goal of lifting China's international image. Programs such as *IYATO* would be considered too trivial or trashy to be charged with the serious mission of lifting China's image in the world, and their dating show format in the variety program category would discourage State Council Information Office (SCIO) propaganda officials and government think-tank scholars from taking them seriously.

*IYATO* is produced by Jiangsu Satellite Television in China. Aiming to be a high-end studio production, the show delivers spectacles of glamour, fashion and unmitigated entertainment. In terms of the format, each program typically features a panel of twenty-four female guests and a series of five bachelors. The female guests learn something about each male hopeful through watching video clips about him and interacting with him in the studio. His first video tells us something about his life background, while the second clip explains what he wants in a woman. The third video reveals what his friends think of him. The female panelists can query him following the screening of each video clip, and can turn their panel light to red at any time to indicate that they are rejecting him. The man who survives three rounds of interrogation gains the right to vie for the heart of his dream girl. He can then ask one of six questions of two of the women who have not turned their light to red, and if he chooses to go on a date with one of the two, he gets two hundred *yuan* to date her. But if he chooses to stick with his favorite, even if she has given him a red light and continues to reject him, he goes home empty-handed. Having said that, he can also decide to give up his right to a date and go home empty-handed. If the man succeeds in getting a date, the couple receives a prize such as a return trip to the Aegean Sea.

The format of the show is innovative, and the hosts – now two men and one woman – are unfailingly cool and humorous. But more importantly, the show is also popular because it taps into Chinese young people's attitudes and anxieties about love, sex and marriage, in response to the rapid and profound social transition of recent decades, which has been experienced by both the television industry and the population alike. As Yan Yunxiang [not in refs] (2010: 502), an anthropologist of the private lives of the Chinese, observes, an individual's life under socialism followed a standard biographical script, and people lived their everyday lives according to “politically and ideologically charged rules about what to wear, whom to date, when to get married, how to raise children, and so forth”. But economic reforms, along with a shift of responsibility from the state to the individual in both the material and ethical domains, have brought this “standard biography” to an end, and China has witnessed radical changes in the life situations and

biographical patterns of individuals. Consequently, Chinese people find that they are having to make choices and decisions about a new range of things – how to conduct themselves and how to relate to each other in society – on their own.

While this shift of responsibility from the state to the individual has created the personal freedom to plan one's life in the face of new possibilities, it has also created extra feelings of uncertainty, vulnerability and anxiety. This is because, apart from the privatization of the self, another important social change affecting Chinese individuals has been the marketization of not just material things but also human relationships. Increasingly, people feel that their relationships are reflected in materialistic terms, and that love itself has acquired a monetary value. More than ever before, marriage has become a market that is ruthless and creates palpable pressure on people. One social cohort, among others, that is acutely feeling this anxiety is the so-called “left over woman” (*sheng nü*) – those women who have been “left on the shelf” and are too old to be viable in the cut-throat marriage market. Intended to convince young, single and educated women to marry when they can instead of being ambitious about career and other pursuits, this discourse puts enormous pressure on young women to get married by their mid-twenties, and reflects an intense concern with marriage and romance on the part of young, educated, urban women.

So, in the context of new personal freedom on the one hand, and the pressure not to be “left on the shelf” on the other, what should young individuals do in their pursuit of successful or fulfilling relationships? How should they enhance their attractiveness to prospective lovers/partners and optimize their potential in the marriage market? What qualities are essential and desirable in looking for a significant other, and how does one ascertain if these qualities are present in candidates? Dating shows like *If You Are the One* may not come with ready-made answers, but they are certainly an entertaining way of passing the time while waiting for Mr or Ms Right.

These questions not only bother young people in the marriage market, but they also worry their parents. On weekends, public parks in the big Chinese cities such as Shanghai, Nanjing and Hangzhou are full of white-haired retirees milling around, with posters behind them advertising the qualities and credentials of their sons and daughters, checking each other out and looking for a marriage partner for their children (Zhang and Sun). They are doing their best to minimize the possibility of seeing their children left on the shelf.

But it is not just those “on the marriage market” who are keenly seeking guidance and advice. Married individuals also live with their own fears and uncertainties. With divorce rates on the rise and the specter of spousal infidelity hovering, one is left wondering what emotional techniques and strategies are effective in ensuring “quality control” in marriage, and how one should adjust one's thinking, talking and feeling in order to maximize the chances of a successful and fulfilling relationship. Taking into account the myriad sources and manifestations of an anxious society, dating shows such as *IYATO* recognize this anxiety, address it, and effectively exploit it, while delivering entertainment to viewers at the same time. Any television program that can achieve this two-pronged outcome is bound to be a winner.

Although most dating shows are primarily aimed at entertaining, they also provide information and practical everyday life advice to their audiences – not only about such matters as what to eat and what to do to stay healthy, but also about how to conduct oneself in intimate relationships and with other members of one's family. In these programs, individuals are encouraged to take on new attitudes and behavior patterns that are best described as “self-fashioning”. Prominent among the diverse themes and topics in which self-fashioning is urged upon viewers are those of love, romance and sexual intimacy, which manifest themselves in a large number of dating and reality television programs, and in talk shows specializing in emotional and psychological counseling and relationship therapy.

The logic of producing entertainment shows, rather than shows in other genres such as current affairs and news, is easy to see. The television industry in China has to face the mandate of delivering politically safe yet highly entertaining and lucrative content. Therefore, reality shows on relationships are the perfect genre for experimenting with format, style and point of view. After all, news is notoriously prone to censorship and control, due to a perceived likelihood that it will trigger social instability and provoke widespread discontent and unrest, thereby posing a threat to the political legitimacy of the Party. Entertainment, on the other hand, is seen as politically innocuous and uncontroversial.

But this is clearly a simplistic view. In October 2011, SARFT issued a set of directives that aimed to “clean up the screen”. Interestingly, in spite of, or perhaps because of, its growing popularity, IYATO was the prime target of this crackdown. Having captured the imagination of the national audience with the many blunt social commentaries made by its contestants, the program also incurred the ire of the Chinese government. Among such remarks, the most famous were made by Ma Nuo, now dubbed the “BMW girl”, who has become a household name in China for her declaration on television: “I’d rather sit in a rich man’s BMW crying than on the back of someone’s bike smiling”. Also well-known is Zhu Zhengfang, dubbed the “big house girl”, who memorably said in one episode: “Only my boyfriend can touch my hand; anyone else who wants to touch it has to pay 200,000 yuan”.

Initially criticizing the program for blatantly promoting materialistic and selfish values, the government requested the show to either lift its moral standards or risk being suspended. Succumbing to this pressure, the show went through a few cosmetic changes in 2011 and, in a token gesture of submission, for a while it added rural migrant workers, Communist Party School academics, and economically disadvantaged or marginalized social identities to the mix of participants, in order to defuse the accusation of fetishizing wealth and commodifying human relationships. IYATO learned from SARFT’s crackdown that, as media and cultural studies scholar Zhang Huiyu astutely observes, success in the cultural domain in China belongs to those who know how to “do both politics and entertainment”.

The source of this moral panic was, however, not so much an innate, aggrieved moral sensibility on the part of the authorities. Rather, it was a response to the fact – one that was dawning on the government with increasing clarity – that instead of being an ideologically safer zone that can avoid or gloss over the conflicts and disparities between rich and poor, entertainment programs can in fact accentuate class tensions. Thus, it was precisely because of the fear of giving visibility to social conflicts that dating shows such as IYATO became the most controversial shows on provincial television a few years ago. The producers of such programs quickly found that the Chinese Party-state, although content to govern at arms’ length most of the time, does not hesitate to impose its definition of vulgarity on matters to do with marriage and love. In the eyes of the government, IYATO had failed to fulfill its number one mission: to “provide moral education in the form of entertainment” (*yu jiao yu le*).

The irony embodied by IYATO is plain to see. Despite the Chinese government’s soft power efforts (with its budget of six billion dollars) to assist its media content to “go global”, the rest of the world mostly finds the content of Chinese media boring and smacking of propaganda. IYATO is one of the few Chinese shows that have bucked this trend and have “made it” in the global and transnational Chinese media scene. But it also happens to be the one that the Chinese government wishes did not exist.

### ***IYATO and soft power by accident***

Since its inception in January 2010, IYATO has maintained its status as the highest rating television

program in China, now boasting some fifty million viewers all over the world (Zhang H.). Mixing brutal honesty, glamour, humorous hosts, entertaining dialogue, dramatic effects, human foibles, fate and luck with the capacity to tap into society's collective anxieties, the show produces a heady and potent brew. As the show's popular host Meng Fei points out, attempting – often unsuccessfully – to create a connection between two lovers is one of the most enduring and universal themes of humankind, and he believes that this universal theme is his secret weapon.<sup>i</sup>

But while the program's compelling mix appeals to both international and domestic viewers, not all domestically successful television programs are equally well received outside China. In contrast to IYATO, a plethora of other relationship shows on Chinese provincial television have taken the task of providing “moral education in the form of entertainment” more seriously. Although these shows have never achieved the same level of popularity as *If You Are the One*, and although they are unlikely to resonate with non-Chinese viewers, they do reasonably well in terms of ratings inside China. After all, many Chinese viewers either would not mind, or are at least used to, a bit of prescriptive advice from time to time. Furthermore, in comparison with IYATO, these programs are politically safe, and aim to reduce rather than increase the social pressure on individuals. Lacking the competitive and sometimes combative aspects of IYATO, the shows typically feature authoritative and often didactic figures such as relationship counsellors and experts, who are brought in to mediate disputes and conflicts between individuals. These authority figures are conspicuously missing in IYATO, and this may well be one reason why IYATO has proved appealing to non-Chinese viewers.

IYATO has been bought and screened by numerous television networks outside China, including in countries such as Korea, Brunei, Singapore (StarHub) and the US (on its Chinese-language television channels). But Australia has proven to have the most enthusiastic audience for IYATO. Not only has a series of Australian editions been repeated (it first screened in 2011, and then again in February 2016), but the whole show has also been phenomenally successful ever since it was bought by SBS, Australia's national broadcaster dedicated to promoting multiculturalism, in 2013. Initially screened once a week, the show quickly captivated mainstream Australian viewers as well as Chinese-speaking migrants so that now, due to popular demand, it is screened three times a week. SBS's online promotion for the show says, “With a viewing audience of up to fifty million per episode, this popular Chinese dating show is a cultural phenomenon”.

IYATO brings unexpected benefits to China's public diplomacy and soft power agenda, and this manifests itself in at least three ways. First, the show has made significant inroads into the Chinese diaspora. In July 2011, IYATO recorded its inaugural overseas edition – using Australian participants – and since then it has produced numerous overseas editions, including for Korea, the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Italy, Spain and New Zealand. These destinations mostly have sizable Chinese migrant communities, and have long been considered both targets and actors of China's public diplomacy and soft power initiatives; not only can they potentially bring investment to China, but they can also promote Chinese culture to the world and lobby for China's political and economic interests overseas (d'Hooghe). The presence of contestants from the Chinese diaspora on the show, as well as the growing size of the diasporic Chinese viewership outside China, is testimony to IYATO's success in appealing to this group.

Second, IYATO has not only proven to have considerable appeal to diasporic Chinese communities globally but it has also effectively presented itself as a window through which mainstream viewers in the global West can understand and even come to like China. Diasporic Chinese tend to concentrate in the global West – i.e. those countries that have liberal-democratic political systems and often have values and ideologies that are generally incompatible with those of China – and it is these nations that present the biggest challenge to China's soft power and public diplomacy ambitions. Although Mandarin is the program's official language, it also regularly features

participants – both male and female – who are foreigners studying or working in China. According to Jiangsu Television’s own statistics, foreign participants from more than thirty countries across six continents have appeared on the show. Foreign contestants on the show indirectly but effectively testify to the growing attraction internationally of Chinese culture and language; after all, they have all mastered the Chinese language in order to get on the show. Also, their involvement in the show as regular participants helps to project an image of China as a society with an open, inclusive and cosmopolitan outlook.

Third and perhaps most importantly, IYATO has gone some way towards correcting an image of the Chinese people and media as victims of a totalizing censorship. Both Chinese and international audiences appreciate the “brutal honesty” of the contestants, which presents an unofficial, and even alternative, version of the China story. As part of its soft power agenda, China has been keen to promote its own “China story” to the world through its media-going-global mission (Hu and Ji). But the global West is deeply suspicious of the official version of the China story, and instead opts for an entertainment media product that was at one point criticized as “trashy” and “vulgar”. In this sense, IYATO, even though it is not tasked with the mission of promoting a more attractive China, has nevertheless generated a narrative of contemporary Chinese society that is more convincing and appealing to a global audience. It has thus inadvertently become a soft power asset, even though the Chinese authorities may be reluctant to give it credit for doing so.

In 2015, SBS produced a documentary entitled *Nineteen Reasons to Love IYATO*, in which local comedians, musicians and TV and radio personalities came up with myriad reasons – ranging from the priceless relationships tips to Meng Fei himself – for the show’s great popularity. Describing the show as having “a massive cult following in Australia as well as in China”, SBS presenter Jeannette Francis asked her forum guests to nominate their own reasons for liking IYATO. Their answers were highly instructive and wide-ranging, and provide clues to why viewers from other cultures and nations also like the show. Forum guests described the program as “addictive” and “like an episode of *The Hunger Games*”; they praised its “sheer honesty”, observing that it “reveals the brutal side of love” and compresses “all the awkwardness of a first date into twenty minutes”; and many singled out the show’s “humorous host full of wisdom”. Featuring a lone male suitor who has to impress a panel of twenty-four young, single and glamorous women wearing “high fashion”, the show “turns the tables in favor of the women”, and has viewers hooked through the “terrifying” and sometimes humiliating experiences of the male suitors, thereby also celebrating the “courage” of those who dare to love despite the risk of “public rejection”.

Comparing IYATO with *The Bachelor*, an Australian dating show that screens on a commercial channel, Australian film critic Marc Fennell says, “I think the primary appeal of IYATO is that it’s a lot more honest. ... In fact, for me this is brutal honesty at its very best and I have to hand it to the Chinese for efficiency”. Fennell says that the clips shown as part of the contestants’ biographical information are hilarious and heartwarming at the same time. “These guys certainly wear their hearts on their sleeves,” he comments. “Some of the things they do to get attention are just ridiculous” [SBS 2015].

Some examples of the ruthless honesty from female contestants that have made the show entertaining – although potentially bruising to the male contestants – include: “You seem like a very good person, but I don’t like you”; “Have you been a nerd ever since you were young?”; “You’re a bit old and short. I’m sorry”; “When you walked, you had duck feet”; “Can you make your bum smaller?”; “Have you thought of losing weight?”; “You look so funny; I can’t stop laughing at you”. Comments from the male contestants can also be abruptly honest and sharp: “If a woman is a book to a man, then the book cover is important”; “If her looks don’t scare children, that would be good enough for me”; “My ideal girl should look neat, pleasant and kissable”.<sup>ii</sup>



All the soft power benefits generated by the show are obvious to Jing Han, manager of the subtitling department of SBS, who is also responsible for subtitling the show. Viewers tell Han that the show offers Australian viewers a “new respect and valued insight into the psyche and intellectual depth of the Chinese people”. And, more than once, she has come across Australian viewers who wanted to learn Mandarin because they want to “get on the show”. Others told her that they wanted to learn Mandarin because they wanted to understand what is said by the contestants in their own language. From the voluminous response she regularly receives from viewers, she concludes with confidence that “Aussies are learning more about Chinese language and culture via this TV show”.<sup>iii</sup>

In November 2015, when Meng Fei and his producer Chen Chen came to Sydney to discuss the second Australian edition, SBS held a special public forum, giving the show’s fans a chance to see their idols in person. One thousand people turned up on a dark and rainy night in an otherwise deserted suburb in western Sydney, all hoping to get a glimpse of their favorite celebrity. While they were predominantly Chinese students and migrants, there were also a considerable number of English-speaking Australians of non-Chinese origin. Although IYATO may not be the most popular television program on Australian television, it has achieved a sizable and dedicated viewership. Fran Martin, media and cinema scholar from Melbourne University, calls it the “best thing on Australian TV right now” and says that Meng Fei possesses “totally cross-cultural star power and screen charisma” (Personal communication 2015).

The fans of IYATO are not limited to grassroots Australia. Anecdotal evidence abounds that the show appeals to viewers across the complete socioeconomic spectrum, and in a wide variety of countries. For instance, the then Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, asked host Meng Fei to sign up his brother for the show; the BBC’s star television producer Paul Jackson thinks that IYATO is better than the UK dating game show *Take Me Out*; and the female partner host of the show, Huang Han, is reported as having been propositioned in Italy.

On the more serious end of the spectrum, media and communication scholars have also started to ponder how IYATO has succeeded where other more worthy, respectable and weighty programs from Chinese television have failed in terms of producing soft power (e.g. Li and Cheng; Miao et al.). In an academic paper focusing on IYATO as a case study, Li and Cheng argue attribute IYATO’s success to its ability to forge partnerships with Chinese-language media organizations in the country of broadcast, with the intention of using their influence to publicize the program and organize the production of overseas editions. This strategy, the authors suggest, is ingenious since, as a provincial television network, Jiangsu Satellite Television does not have the resources and power of national television and therefore has to seek alternative sources of support. To Li and Cheng, the dramatic increase in popularity of IYATO outside China is also made possible by the fact that as of 2012, the show became available on YouTube, the world’s biggest video platform, giving access to global viewers who otherwise would not have been exposed to the program.

Though there is some truth in this somewhat narrow explanation, what contributes to the international popularity of IYATO is much more multi-factorial. In this sense, the connection between IYATO and the concept of soft power is ironic, given that it only achieved its soft power status accidentally, as a by-product of its outstanding success as an entertainment program. We can even go so far as to say that IYATO has perhaps done more than all of CCTV’s and Xinhua’s news and current affairs programs put together in promoting an attractive image of China overseas – not in spite of, but precisely because of, its unwillingness to “toe the party line”.

## Conclusion

So, what has IYATO got that CCTV and Xinhua do not have? A careful attempt to answer this question may provide clues, through negative comparison, as to why China’s media-going-global initiatives have so far produced few tangible results. Equally importantly, it may also point to some

alternative ways in which soft power can be conceptualized and productively pursued. Through an analysis of various aspects of IYATO, this chapter has offered – albeit implicitly – a diagnosis of how soft power is understood and deployed in the Chinese context. The main argument is simple enough: although the show is arguably a phenomenal success in terms of promoting soft power on behalf of China, such a success was possible only because the show did not set out to be a “soft power” project in the first place, and in fact lacks all the key dimensions often identified with China’s soft power initiatives, as reviewed below.

First, IYATO is not a top-down government initiative. Although all television in China is state-owned, be it national, provincial or local, it is clear that Jiangsu Satellite Television is not burdened with a mandate to promote China’s soft power. Its decision to expand its overseas editions was a business strategy rather than a top-down government initiative, and in doing this, it aimed to generate revenue rather than political or ideological influence. Its success can therefore be attributed to the creative entrepreneurship that was unleashed and fostered by a competitive television market, not to political correctness.

Second, the program is not Chinese propaganda material that is freely and widely distributed outside China. Rather, it enters the international mediasphere as a commodity, and makes money by selling broadcasting and associated rights. Thus, the distribution and marketing of the show is dictated by the economic bottom line rather than the Party line.

Third, by any measure, IYATO does not follow the standard script of the “China story” that propaganda officials instruct the Chinese media to tell. It cannot be described as a program that aims to foster an image of China as a nation that is blessed by social harmony and united by a common “China dream”. In fact, at times it accentuates inequality, often exploits collective anxiety, and from time to time brings to light some aspects of Chinese society that the central government deems unedifying. While its “brutal honesty” has won the hearts of international and domestic audiences alike, at one stage it came close to being shut down for deviating too much from core socialist values. The fact that it has a checkered history with the central authorities seems to add to, rather than detract from, its appeal.

In conclusion, based on the IYATO success story, it appears that China’s attempt to promote soft power has little hope of yielding tangible results unless it ceases to be a top-down government initiative. We might also conclude that cultural products with genuine soft power potential can only come from creative enterprises that arise organically within the non-state sector. This should not be misconstrued as an argument in favor of a neoliberal discourse of cultural industries. Rather, it is simply a recognition of the obvious fact that for an authoritarian Party-state that nevertheless harbors soft power ambitions, China must first and foremost realize that it has a serious “soft power deficit” (Nye, “China’s Soft Power”) and for this reason, government action in any shape or form will smack of propaganda. And since, again as Nye (*Bound to Lead*) famously asserts, the best propaganda is not propaganda, the potential of China’s vast soft power resources – its culture, language, medicine, cuisine – cannot be productively tapped if the Communist Party is seen to be in the driving seat. Credibility, as a “scarce commodity” in the business of soft power (Nye, *Bound to Lead*), is many times more elusive for China precisely because of China’s single-party rule. Besides, the more freely and widely distributed its propaganda, the more suspiciously it will be perceived. David Shambaugh, author of *China Goes Global*, is right when he comments that money cannot buy soft power, and respect has to be earned. IYATO is still a product of China’s state television and therefore still ultimately subject to its censorship, but precisely because of this, its success – both at home and abroad – seems all the more remarkable. For those who are thoughtful about China’s challenges and opportunities in pursuing soft power, the show has indeed afforded plenty of food for thought.



**Notes**

## Works Cited

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- i Meng Fei, interview with SBS at the SBS Public Forum, 15 Nov. 2015, Sydney.
  - ii Quoted by Jing Han, public speech at the SBS Public Forum, *ibid.*
  - iii Jing Han, *ibid.*